

# SEC needs to be held responsible

[http://www.dchieftain.com/opinion/sec-needs-to-be-held-responsible/article\\_d093814a-4ab1-11eb-afeb-6702b2b9fb31.html](http://www.dchieftain.com/opinion/sec-needs-to-be-held-responsible/article_d093814a-4ab1-11eb-afeb-6702b2b9fb31.html) December 31, 2020. To the editor

The SEC provides service to residents of Catron, Cibola, Sierra, Socorro and Valencia Counties. If there is a power pole, power line or other equipment owned by the SEC to provide power to members of the SEC, the SEC has an easement which gives a legal right for the SEC to gain access to private and public property to maintain its lines and equipment. The legal right is accompanied by the legal responsibility – the SEC is legally required to maintain its easements to keep its lines and equipment clear of any hazards.

However, despite the responsibility that the SEC has to maintain its easements by trimming or removing trees and other vegetation that is a potential hazard, the SEC is failing to ensure that this is done in a systematic fashion. This is a threat to public safety and SEC members need to be holding the SEC accountable for this failure

To emphasize the public safety issues at stake, I would like to share my story, reflecting the SEC's failures – and refusal to accept responsibility for those failures – with other members of the SEC.

In May 2019, during a period of high wind gusts, the Escondida/Quebradas area suffered from a power outage. The power flickered three times before going out entirely which is indicative of attempts by automatic reclosers to push electricity through the line to clear a transient or temporary fault. After three attempts, the system is designed to determine the fault is permanent and shut off power until a lineman can actually inspect the lines to determine the cause of the fault. This occurred as designed. However, as the wildfires in California over the past decade or so have shown electric companies, there is a real hazard to using automatic reclosers during times where the risk of fire is higher than normal. As everyone living in this county is aware, drought conditions combined with high winds always results in fire conditions being rated high. When high fire conditions are combined with vegetation growing up into the power lines, the risk of a fire is increased.

I and my neighbors were extremely lucky in May 2019 because the fire that resulted from vegetation in the power lines occurred during the daytime and the smoke and flames were seen within a relatively short period of time. Even so, by the time the first fire crews arrived on scene, several acres of tamarisk and dry grasses were ablaze and the fire had reached the privacy fence surrounding my neighbors' home. Had this fire started in the middle of the night, with no one to notice the smoke and flames, this could have, and very likely would have, resulted in the death of my neighbors while they lay sleeping in bed. This fact horrifies me.

As it transpired, it took fire crews from three different agencies to extinguish the fire and the last fire crew didn't leave until Friday afternoon – the fire started Monday late afternoon/early evening.

In keeping with its usual mode of operation, the SEC refused to accept any responsibility for the fire, even after investigators from the State of NM and BLM issued a report indicating that vegetation in the lines was the cause of the fire. As the SEC was unwilling, or unable, to provide me with any information to support its position, I was forced to file a lawsuit to obtain the information I had requested. In the discovery phase of that lawsuit, the SEC released its policy and procedure regarding Vegetation Management. However, while the policy states that an annual work plan regarding Vegetation Management is required to be developed and implemented, the SEC has failed to both provide any annual work plan or any documentation that reflects work is being systematically performed in accordance with a plan.

Since the fire, I have been observing power poles and lines as I travel throughout Socorro County. I have personally observed trees and vegetation within the SEC easements and interfering with the power lines. Given that the SEC is not fulfilling its responsibility with regards to maintaining its easements, it is clear that there is a

risk to public safety in this county. I am very concerned that there is a very real possibility that the next fire will do more than property damage and will cause the injury or even death of someone. SEC members, in all counties, need to hold the SEC accountable for its negligence and insist that the SEC develop and implement the work plan that is set out in its Vegetation Management policy.

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